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FOSSILIZATION AMONG TEACHERS OF ENGLISH A PLEA AGAINST PEDAGOGISM

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It is a notorious fact that too frequently teachers of composition are not capable of writing good English. Where their style is readably clear, it is likely to be so frigid and wooden that one longs even for a lapse of grammar or a striking vulgarism, if only to relieve the stiff correctness. I have known a man whose opinions on the science of composition were listened to with respect by large pedagogical gatherings, and who yet was incapable of producing a sound, telling sentence on paper.

Perhaps the explanation is that constantly analytic and critical habits of mind unfit a man for the synthetic processes of production. His very familiarity with theory and the technique of the finished product will render him in practice too conscious in respect to these—a condition fatal to that air of easy spontaneity that constitutes one of the charms of good style. Indeed, style, after all, is not more a matter of rules and formal observances than it is of personality, of individual character, and a too critical scrupulosity of method, by cramping this element of individuality, is bound to interfere with the natural relations that should exist between the writer and his product. A great book is great, not because of the absence of barbarisms and solecisms, but because it is the utterance of a great spirit filled with a great thought; if the manner, too, is great (as, of course, it must be), it is not primarily because of laborious effort spent to make it so, but because of the great spirit and the great thought which lay behind the effort. The real effort, moreover, was not necessarily bestowed immediately upon the turning of the phrases of this particular masterpiece, but filled long years of preparation with toil and difficulty.

Are we then to conclude that our poor, inarticulate precisionist

must abandon all thought of trying to write well? that he must henceforth be quite dumb until he has developed a great spirit and has mastered, or has been mastered by, a great thought, when, and when only, his utterance will take care of itself and claim audience of the world? The difficulty with this solution is that we are not all "mute inglorious Miltons," and there is a danger that we should have to wait a long time for those divine emissaries that are supposed to fire "with all utterance and knowledge" the lips of those chosen. But if ours are not titanic souls that speak with organ voices, may we not at least look to it that such poor souls as we stand possessed of be not utterly cramped and dwarfed by the lives we strive to fit them to? Here, I think, must lie not only the true solution of the English teacher's personal difficulties of expression, but also a corrective for many a crime of schoolroom perpetration against the soul-life of his pupils.

There has been altogether too much discussion in our day as to how much technical grammar, philology, formal rhetoric, and the like, should enter into the teaching of English. If the English course is to assume its proper place in the curriculum, if it is to accomplish anything in the direction of its true aim, which must ever be æsthetic and not scientific, there can be in the end but one answer to this question: only so much of these things should be tolerated as is found absolutely necessary, and the less of them found necessary the better. Perhaps I appear too dogmatic in thus brushing aside as already answered a question which is still agitating many graver and wiser heads than mine. If so, my excuse must be that, while I am wholly out of sympathy with much that is being done in the English work of our high schools, I am unreservedly optimistic as to the future. I am strong in my faith that the day will soon come when literature will be generally regarded as an end unto itself—not as a means to other ends altogether undesirable to ordinary things, and all but unattainable to everyone save the specialist on "things in general." I am hopeful that some day our English textbooks will be edited solely with a view to acquainting the student with the book's soul, which is the author's own—not to sending him on a futile search after the editor's which died long since either of starvation or indigestion. Believing, as I do, in the future with respect to these points (and my belief is

grounded on the recognition of much that is good in the present), I wish to take the ultimate solution of the question for granted and apply its lessons to present difficulties.

If, then, the English course aims properly at soul-culture, not at soul-slaughter, the first and most important essential to good English teaching is that the teacher himself shall have a real live soul of his own to bring into the classroom. With this the rest will follow as the night the day. He will enter at once into sympathetic relations with those young souls intrusted to his care, and will never fail to find the shortest and surest way to bring them inspiration and sustenance from the noble sources in our literature. In the composition work he will lead them constantly toward a freer self-expression, irrespective for the most part of grammatical rules and rhetorical accessories—the spontaneous self-expression, however crude, of thinking, feeling beings, obeying the promptings of an awakened creative instinct. Surely with such an aim and with such an attitude, and, above all, with such a soul, the English teacher will accomplish much that is frequently wholly forgotten or neglected, and his work will become as pleasurable to his pupils as it is profitable. Just as surely, I believe, are all the grind, the worry, and the positive dislike that frequently attend the student's work in English to be attributed to lack of the spiritual atmosphere and purpose.

So much from the standpoint of the pupil's welfare; but our real concern here is as much with the teacher as with the pupil. The point I wish to make is that where the work of the pupils is a dreary drudgery, the teacher who is to blame is to be pitied as much as they; for in his case the conditions are a sure symptom of that dreadful disease to which all teachers, as soon as they enter the profession, become liable—fossilization. The teacher in general whose work has become uninspired and mechanical has simply lost touch with life—with the life of men at large, with the life of his pupils, and with the life of whatever makes for beauty in the world about him; his own life is no longer an activity, but a state; his concern is for the method, not for the result; his teaching is only an employment imposed upon him from without, not a process operating in accordance with inward law and purpose. He has become, in short, a mere pedagogical machine, with rusty bearings and broken cogs. That

he is not fit in this condition to enter a schoolroom goes without saying. The question is: How did he get that way? and what, for his own soul's sake, if indeed it is not already too late, shall he do about it?

In the particular case of the English teacher, I think it is clear that this quenching of the vital spark has come of a too constant application to the technical and theoretical phases of his subject, to the neglect of its spiritual aspects and the side of its real values. Not that technique and theory are undeserving of serious attention; indeed, in their proper place and with proper correlations, they are adjuncts to the highest literary study; but the difficulty is that they are likely soon to assume for him who studies them the importance of an end unto themselves. For it is a fact beyond question that the critical faculties, which are after all almost purely discursive, cannot be cultivated with too exclusive attention without some impairment of the faculty of intuitive appreciation—what Matthew Arnold calls “the power which we have in us for beauty.” To be forever analyzing a great work to detect the method, tearing it to pieces to see how it was put together, comparing part with part and this masterpiece with that, in order to determine the degree and kind of excellence, not only is a futile kind of exercise *when pursued for its own sake*, but is absolutely destructive, when so pursued, of the sense of beauty and of beauty itself. The laboratory method in the study of literature will never do, if it means vivisection; for literature is life, and you cannot come to know life (in this case, at any rate) by destroying it.

The fossilized English teacher is, then, like most degenerates, a victim of bad habits. These habits may have originated from any of a variety of causes. They may have been formed early in life—perhaps as far back as his own high-school period, when he gave in to influences similar to those that are injuring his own pupils; or perhaps they came later in the classes of a philologist who “interpreted” literature for him in college; possibly, even, they were the result of a heartless mistaken school system which wholly discounted the teacher's individuality in favor of set requirements and an imposed method. This last cause deserves special mention, since it is related to one that concerns the whole profession. One of the curses of present-day education is the tendency to increase and complicate the

all but futile claptrap and folderol of what we loftily designate as "organization" and "system." I suppose these are a necessary evil but an evil they surely are to the degree that they obstruct and hinder the performance of the teacher's proper serious labors. Wherever so-called "system" has a special importance of its own, the teachers who are enslaved to it are likely to get into the habit of regarding it as paramount; as soon as the teacher falls into this error, he surrenders a large part of his rights and functions as a live, self-active being.

But, from whatever causes these ruinous habits may have had their origin, they are habits which, with all their attendant evils, might have been avoided, if there had been in the beginning a right conception of the nature of literature and the aims of literary study. They are habits, indeed, which I think can be overcome, provided their victim is made aware of them in time. The cure is a simple one, or at least it may be simply stated, since, like any other real cure, it is to be effected by the removal of the causes. The removal of the causes in this case means just one thing—getting back to life; life here means breadth of sympathy, variety of interests, capacity for healthy enjoyment, knowledge of men and the world at large; everything, in short, which makes for beauty and power of personal character. For character surely is as much the result as it is the cause of the kind of life we live. What we as teachers need is broad, varied living, as opposed to a narrow, uninspired professionalism. The paradox in the case of the English teacher who cannot express himself is to be explained as a phase of degeneracy: his condition is symptomatic of fossilization, and he should undergo a spiritual renovation. To that end, let him mingle freely with men in other walks of life than his own; let him read widely and for pleasure; let him put himself in touch with the life and spirit of the time, and know the current of the world's events; in other words, let him begin to practice what he is supposed to preach, *life*.